

2021 Fall Conference Gatherings of Greater Milwaukee Synod

The Greater Milwaukee Synod facilitated conversations at eight gatherings in late October and early November 2021, including one in each of the six conferences plus two online zoom meetings. The conversations were a first step in preparation for the bishop election at the 2022 Synod Assembly with the purpose of reflecting on where we have been as a synod in mission and ministry and to begin to discern where we may need to go. Approximately 180 people participated in the gatherings. Notes were recorded of all of the post-it responses and table discussions. This report provides details on responses, along with summary of the comments and discussion.

A. The first section of each gathering focused on writing individual post-it responses to each of three questions. The responses were analyzed and compiled and are reported by categories.

1. **How have we lived into our mission and vision well in the past two to six years? What are we pleased about?**
 - a. Speaking out, lifting up questions, increasing awareness, being courageous, actively working for change on issues of diversity, equity, and justice
 - 21 responses – on social justice and equity, diversity, inclusion, taking on difficult topics, stepping outside comfort zone, including Bishop pastoral statements and showing up
 - 20 – as voice and witness for racial justice
 - 16 – focus on work for LGBTQIA+ inclusion and living out what it means to be a reconciling church
 - 8 – showing up and advocating for immigrants and refugees
 - b. Connecting, supporting, sharing talents, and fostering community
 - 10 responses on importance of zoom meetings in building community and providing other support for rostered ministers in the midst of the pandemic
 - 6 – promoting community, sharing gifts and resources, and working together across congregations to love and care for one another and collaborate for ministry
 - 10 – focus on regular and clear synod communication to stay connected during the pandemic (Need more communication from synod that fits into small congregations)
 - c. Providing synod leadership, pastoral presence, programming, and support for rostered ministers and congregations
 - 35 responses – appreciation for pastoral presence of Bishop’s office, listening stance, encouragement, support, adaptation of leadership in helping rostered ministers and congregations deal with Covid and all of the resulting challenges and decisions; walking with congregations in transition
 - 14 – appreciation for resource and leadership support, including Faithful Innovations, Stewardship for All Seasons, Together in Mission, and other leadership development and synod gatherings; staffed for mission
 - 7 – engagement, support, and resources for using and embracing new technology
 - d. Lifting up our synod vision and mission, in welcoming new people, listening to the words of Jesus, maintaining the centrality of worship, and facing challenging times, “doing the best we can knowing that we could do better” (11 responses)

- e. Serving, advocating, caring for the underprivileged, poor, sick, elderly, hungry, and other people through community services and community organizations (19 responses)
- f. Supporting Outreach for Hope as it supports and sustains city churches, missions, and ministries (17 responses)
- g. Supporting partnerships with Tanzania and El Salvador and domestic and foreign missions, including Lutheran World Relief and Mt. Meru coffee project (10 responses)

2. Which values and practices do we need to hold up and emphasize in living our vision and mission?

- a. The following values were noted alone, or with additional definition and emphasis
 - Courage – 25: to try new things and not fear failure; accept new ways of reaching people with God’s message; to experience newness; to stand for truth and justice
 - Collaboration – 24: learn together; reduce overlap and strengthen larger vision of the Church; work together to be “synod”; collaborate for volunteer support of community needs where one church doesn’t have the resources alone; community organizing
 - Compassion – 15: for all God’s children; loving and trying to understand each other
 - Curiosity – 11: open-mindedness; faithful imagination; willingness to say “I don’t know”
- b. The following practices were noted to be held up and emphasized
 - Innovation – 29: continue to change for the good of the synod; creative approaches to proclaim the Gospel in midst of new realities; new ideas on how to be “church” and trying things as we engage a ‘new’ world; practicing risk; adapt to alternative approaches to ministry—online, outdoors, small groups, etc.
 - Invitation – 17: invite and engage our neighbors to help us in our mission/values; “come and see Jesus”; attracting young families
 - Leadership Development – 16: that encourages and excites rather than dictates; find out what people are excited about and be intentional in learning opportunities; could there be a sharing economy of leadership development? How can we learn from those already here?
 - Worship – 16: help congregations do worship practices better; adapting worship to attract the unchurched and dechurched
 - Listening – 15: listening to understand
 - Showing Up – 13: for stands for community justice; most important step in facilitating community is showing up, in the neighborhood and congregation and for each other
 - Learning – 12: “we can’t improve or grow if we don’t know what the problems are or how to solve them”; foster commitment to humility in learning; could we raise up what we could learn from one another in creative ways?
 - Prayer – 11: for the spirit’s guidance; prayer to be more public and extemporaneous; could we be involved in praying together more regularly separate from business meetings?
 - Generosity – 9
- c. The following values and practices were lifted up in addition to the values and practices identified in the synod statement

- Diversity/Equity/Justice – 26 responses related to the broad themes of diversity equity and justice: remain bold; break down walls that divide people; all are welcome/respected/ valued; continue learning how to be inclusive, inviting and listening to people who are different from ourselves; hold up value of diverse views of members who need more time to grow in faith and inclusivity
- Racial Justice – 11 responses emphasized discussion about everyday racism, racial diversity training and action; creating learning environments for understanding and acting against racism
- LGBTQIA – 8 responses in being open to LGBTQ+ members; creating learning environments for LGBTQ+ awareness and understanding; lifting up gifts and values of LGBTQIA+ people
- Form Partnerships – 6 responses focused specifically on building active partnerships and living into faithful relationships, learning together; maintain and support urban/suburban connections for suburbanites to become more aware of life situations of urban dwellers
- Acts of Service, Mercy, and Benevolence – 4 responses to support various missions of the church; help poor in our communities; care and love those living on the edge

3. Where have we noticed struggle or challenge in our mission during the past 2 to 6 years?

- a. Reversing congregational/religious decline – 33 responses: need to find people where they are at; give people a reason to belong to church; disengaged church members; declining church budgets; pastoral wellness decline; looking in rear view mirror and waiting for things to return to way they used to be; how to reach people not “like” us; struggle to create and form new ways for Christian community
- b. Connecting with young families, youth, young adults – 8 responses: find ways to connect with and engage young families, youth, college age, 20-30 year olds, and young and middle age adults
- c. Meeting challenges related to Covid pandemic – 30 responses: “Did the pandemic teach people church/God isn’t important?”; challenges to worship opportunities; struggle to sustain identity and mission during Covid; struggles to connect, collaborate, and support one another; inequities in having access to technology; impact on rostered ministers
- d. Addressing Diversity/Equity/Justice
 - 20 responses related to valuing and embracing all people; having the courage to say and do the right thing and to move from being “all talk, no walk”; equity in distribution of resources; building relationships outside of own community; being church in the world
 - Racial Justice – 27 responses on the challenges to becoming more diverse; struggle with racial inequality and covert racism in congregations; addressing white privilege and fully embracing the voice and presence of leaders and congregations who are not white; lack of new mission start focusing on BIPOC with young BIPOC leader; lack of BIPOC on synod staff
 - LGBTQIA+/RIC – 12 responses on full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ leaders and community; challenge for all congregations to wrestle with RIC identity

- e. Having political/theological differences – 25 responses related to divisions within congregations based on different opinions on issues and values, politics and culture; relationship of justice, politics, and Gospel; struggle to have honest conversations about current events
- f. Connecting with Lay Leaders – 10 responses on reaching out to and developing congregational lay leaders; spreading the word on involvement in programs and mission of synod beyond pastors; supporting congregations, not just pastors; support in dealing with congregational conflict
- g. Ensuring synod and congregation sustainability – 16 responses on struggle with staffing limitations and financial support for struggling congregations and important synod ministries; challenge to innovate without resources; stewardship strategy for closing or merging churches; supporting small and rural churches; difficulty of the call process
- h. Adapting to change – 21 responses focused on reluctance to change, holding on to traditions, fear of trying something new; moving systematically into new ways of operating and leading communities of faith; “real change is hard”
- i. Keeping congregations informed and connected – 7 responses addressed need for communication to keep congregations informed; address separation of city/suburb/further out areas

B. The second section of the gatherings provided the opportunity for small groups to reflect on the post-it responses and to identify gaps and questions for moving forward as church. All responses of gaps or questions are reported within common identified themes.

1. Focusing on the challenges for congregations in re-defining what it means to be Church – 62 responses
 - Engaging people; faith formation; building community in new ways; finding new ways to be relevant to people’s lives; honoring traditions but reaching beyond them
 - Yoking churches; sharing resources; more collaboration for common goals
 - Living into a hybrid church for worship, gathering, and learning; resources for technology; challenge of engaging with people when relying on technology
 - New reformation; new models of Christian community; whole new model for ministry; thinking through iterations of church beyond congregation and worship in a building
 - Taking risks on new ventures and collaborations with community and faith partners
 - What is the Gospel for our time and how can we communicate it?
2. Attracting and engaging young people – 24 responses
 - Working to meet youth where they are and excite them in ministry
 - Engaging 20-40 year olds and moving them into leadership and active ministries
 - Attracting younger families and involving parents
 - Teaching Sunday school and confirmation in new and engaging ways
 - Providing synod staff support to youth, family, intergenerational ministries
3. Focusing on full inclusion of LGBTQIA+ community, BIPOC, other languages – 50 responses

- Encouraging engagement in the RIC process for all congregations
 - Striving for diversity in rostered leadership; Supporting BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ candidates through seminary and into congregation calls
 - Calling congregations to values of inclusion and justice in new ways; establish expectations, visions, and accountability; more follow through for changed behaviors, changed policies, changed actions; teach about justice, grounded in the Gospel
 - Shift from “All are Welcome” to being church IN community with others; listen to voices of people of color, immigrants, LGBTQIA+
 - Deepening the work of racial justice by uncovering systemic white privilege, culture, practices, and policies; examining racial disparities
 - Providing bi-lingual resources; encouraging congregations to offer more than one language
 - More diversity on synod staff and in power positions
4. Bridging Divides – 24 responses
- Building and strengthening community across differences that are framed as political; see one another as people of God
 - Defining love of neighbor; shared sense of identity and stick together across divisions
 - Unpacking confusion between theology and politics; sharing Gospel as God’s message without causing people to see it as political
 - Engaging in civil conversations across polarized issues; moving conversations into faith conversations rather than political talking points; same church seen as too liberal/too conservative
 - Equipping pastors/leaders to speak and lead within divisive climate
 - Forming true partnerships across urban/suburban/rural divide
5. Supporting Rostered Ministers – 23 responses
- Caring for pastors; need pastors to pastors; supporting mental health for leaders
 - Review MET process and re-think call process; relationship with seminaries in preparing leaders for current/future church needs
 - Exploring the role of pastor in new day; pastor in community as much as in church; educate lay leaders on new role of clergy
 - Supporting clergy in change initiatives
 - Requiring participation of clergy in training and workshops; value of getting together, learning from one another, and receiving support
6. Sustainability – 17 responses
- Survival and place of smaller congregations
 - Process of closing well; innovative gifting of assets; using stored funds for innovative ministries for change rather than only using interest to prolong death
 - Fewer property-based congregations, with new expressions of faith communities; honesty in “pruning” congregations to live well and thrive; examine use of resources to sustain old buildings
 - Sharing financial resources to support healthy ministries; shifting resources to support growing and thriving ministries; sharing of staff, music, technology
 - Explore governance and financial structures for the future

7. Relationship between Synod and Congregations and among Congregations – 28 responses
- Role of synod leadership in being directive or convening spaces for collaboration
 - Making resources of congregations and synod available to needs of community, including Afghan refugees, immigrants, mental/emotional health, substance abuse
 - Strengthening communication across congregations and ministries; increased visibility and interpretation of impact of synod-wide ministries to members of congregations
 - Sharing best practices; sharing resources
 - Examine synod structure to meet current needs
 - Build awareness of ELCA social statements to think broadly vs local focus
8. Remaining Questions and Comments
- How will our actions witness the Gospel? How does our lack of action reflect our faith?
 - How do we show and tell who Jesus is and why Jesus is key to all of what the question mentions?
 - How do we start to heal those who don't want to be healed? How do we bring back Jesus to the world? How do we face anger and turn it to discussion and forgiveness?
 - Are we dedicated enough to great change to accept that it requires great disruption?
 - Are we monitoring what we do to see if our actions result in change/growth/new life?
 - How do we allow space for people to grieve the losses that come with change?
 - How do we address new forms and metrics of what it means to be a healthy, vital church, including people attending online church?
 - I think we have a good mission and vision. The task now is to more intentionally live into that. I think it's important, no matter who our synod leadership is, to continue all this important work.
 - Be transparent and courageous. Embrace one another and challenge one another to construct opportunities for transformation and openness.
 - Appreciation for the variety of gifts within the body of Christ gathered in the Greater Milwaukee Synod.